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ABSTRACT

Surviving the position of college president requires the development of a presidential survival kit filled with idiosyncratic items not normally associated with formal educational training. Strength, agility, control, and the ability to improvise are some of the talents required of a college president. In addition, the longevity and success of a community college president can be increased by carefully molding, advancing, and embodying the institution's mission. The institutional mission of LaGuardia Community College (LCC) in New York maintains focuses on commitment to multiculturalism and pluralism; economic development and empowerment; and access, retention, and persistence through transfer. Among the problems encountered by LCC's new president in 1989, the two most threatening to the college's mission were a series of student strikes and a controversy over artistic and religious freedom. Student protests, involving building takeovers, followed a series of tuition increases. To deal with the mounting crisis, and to assure campus access to non-protesting students, the president resorted to calling in the police to assist campus security, which eventually ended the protests. In another incident, a display of student art work was termed pornographic and heretical by some, leading to demonstrations by students and church groups. While taking pains to explain the college's mission to students, church leaders, and politicians, LCC's president permitted the display to remain in the interests of academic freedom. LCC's commitment to multiculturalism and pluralism is a critical ingredient in its institutional mission and educational thrust for the 21st century. (PAA)

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(Panel Presentation for 1993 AACC Conference)

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The Perils of a College President,

or, Let's Go to the Movies

In thinking about the invitation to join a panel devoted to the perils of the college presidency, I was reminded of a piece of advice that might be particularly appropriate for new presidents. Here it is:

> Never tell people your troubles--because
> half of them don't care, and the other half
> are sort of glad it happened to you.

Before long, I'm going to violate these wise words by sharing with you a litany of personal presidential problems, for I'm an old rather than new college president, and sometimes my career reads like the Perils of Pauline, or Paul.

If I've survived the perils of the presidency (so far), it's because I've developed a mildly bemused and idiosyncratic approach to them. And let me suggest that all of us need presidential survival kits--kits filled with idiosyncratic items not normally associated with formal educational training.

So at the outset, permit me one mildly heretical statement: on most typical college afternoons, I would rather be at a movie matinee featuring Bogart and Bergman (you know the film I'm talking about) than at a standard meeting. I confess to this weakness - this fondness for old movies. They're a source of solace and inspiration for me--and even, as you shall see, a creative prescription for presidential survival.

One of my favorite film sequences from the golden age of American musicals occurs in Stormy Weather. I'm thinking of that marvelous scene--many of you know it--where the Nicholas Brothers do these incredible splits, one hurdling over the other, down a marble staircase that seems a mile long.

Now let me try to turn this magical moment in film history into a metaphor for presidential survival. For it seems to me that college and university presidents, especially in these uncertain times, are constantly being forced to perform splits-- or to tap-dance wildly for diverse and decidedly demanding crowds. Strength, agility, control, the ability to improvise: these are some of the talents we need if we hope to enjoy a long and distinguished presidency.

To continue my musical metaphor, it strikes me that our routines--the splits we constantly have to perform--can be made manageable only if we have a cogent script and a committed cast, with everyone dancing (hopefully) to the same tune. And, I suggest, the script that we follow should be the mission of the institution, while the cast (or players) are, of course, the many constituencies that make up the college community.

At this point, I'm going to move away from my movie metaphor (after all, you can extend a metaphor only so far). So let me emerge from the movie house into academic reality, and stress my central thesis about the importance of institutional mission to presidential survival.

It strikes me that most institutions of higher education do not have clearly defined and delineated missions--a well-articulated vision that might distinguish a college or university from all others. Of course, there are exceptions, but these exceptions tend to be the elite schools--the Harvards and Stanfords--or the well-established liberal arts colleges like Smith or Vassar, each with a carefully articulated tradition or "legacy."

Now the problem of "mission" is particularly acute when you consider the nation's community colleges. Admittedly, a large part of the problem derives from the sheer multiplicity of missions that any typical community college attempts to assume responsibility for. And the problem is aggravated by the "two cultures" argument over whether community colleges should be vocational

training grounds or institutions preparing students for transfer. Finally, community college "bashing" by outside forces makes us even more uncertain about the nature of our mission.

Given the competing needs and conflicts that blur a community college's mission, it is no wonder that presidential paranoia begins to set in. A president's life at a two-year college can be short and unhappy, to vary a refrain from a Hemingway title (made, incidentally, into a movie). Nevertheless, let me suggest that community college presidents can improve their odds for a long and happy life by molding, advancing, and embodying their institution's mission.

I should point out at this juncture that I have spent 22 years in community college settings, including two tours of duty at LaGuardia Community College - the first as a dean in the early 1970's when we founded the College under the banner of open admissions; and the second starting in 1989, when I became LaGuardia's president. (A friend and colleague likens my years away from LaGuardia in the late 70's and 1980's as a wandering in the wilderness, much like the Prodigal Son, but this middle period is the subject for another paper on the perils of the presidency.) For today, I'll focus my remarks on my experiences at LaGuardia over the last four years, but I would like to emphasize the LaGuardia legacy or mission that I inherited in 1989.

LaGuardia was forged in the fires of open admissions,

mandated for the City University of New York in 1970, and since 1971 the College has been in the forefront of access and opportunity for inner city students - and today also for foreign students who represent 10% of the college's population. Three of the key elements in our mission are these: 1) multiculturalism and pluralism; 2) economic development and empowerment (realized through such structures as our cooperative education program); and 3) access, retention, and persistence in higher education through transfer. This is LaGuardia's bare-bones mission, although our current mission statement is actually three pages long.

I promised you a catalogue of presidential problems, and at this stage I'll provide it. It will be an abridged catalogue focusing on six "perils" that I've confronted

since assuming LaGuardia's presidency in 1989, and then I'll treat two of them as paradigms for presidential survival.

- First, as soon as I assumed the presidency of LaGuardia in 1989, I learned that the college was required by New York State to eliminate its quarter calendar, which it had used from its inception in 1971. We were given one year to literally transform the college and all course offerings.

- Second, I learned immediately that the College budget would be reduced, and indeed during my tenure the budget has dropped overall by 15%.

- Third, I had to deal with an increasingly overworked,

disillusioned faculty (50% of whom hold PhD's) and staff whose contract expired in 1990, and who labored without a contract under increasingly difficult conditions for the next three years. (Incidentally, forty-five senior faculty and staff took early retirement in 1991 and 1992.)

- Fourth, even though tuition increased from $1,225 to $2,100 for full-time students, we enjoyed (or suffered) a population explosion to 10,000 credit students and another 30,000 non-credit students--these in four buildings that the Middle States Association (whose SWAT team arrived on campus along with the New York State Education Review in 1992) asserted were woefully inadequate.

- Fifth, within my first year, I was treated to a series of student strikes.

- And finally, I found myself embroiled in a controversy over artistic freedom, religion, and sex - a crisis that I shall term the "Beatitudes" episode.

Welcome, then, to the presidency. Now you know why I like to escape to the movies.

Any one of these crises had the potential of undermining LaGuardia's mission, but I'll concentrate on the student uprising and the "Beatitudes" episode, which you probably prefer to hear about. (They definitely are the most cinematic of the six crises.) The students felt put upon by a series of tuition increases over a four year period, and this feeling of frustration and helplessness

prompted them to "attention-getting actions" (a polite presidential euphemism for revolt). The actions chosen by the students took the form of "building takeovers." Four of these "takeovers" happened on my watch. I had to make decisions in each case as to whether or not I would call in the police to resolve these problems or find alternate ways of dealing with them. Decisions, decisions, decisions!!!

After one particular protest rally and menacing signs of another takeover, I authorized the Dean of Administration to remove the front doors to the Main Building of the College. My thinking here was that you cannot chain the doors--a favorite tactic of the students--if the doors are not in place. This particular strategy seemed to have thwarted their efforts for about a week--until their

creative minds assembled a counter strategy around our brilliant plans.

In a scene straight out of Les Mis (you see, life does imitate art), the students effectively blocked the main entrance with several hundred desks and other assorted pieces of furniture. Thus another standoff was in progress and new strategies on my part had to be invented to address this crisis. On the one hand, there is the Chancellor of the University expecting that the situation will be resolved expeditiously. On the other hand, we have a group of protesting students whose physical safety had to be considered, and yet another large constituency of non-protesting students who were being deprived from attending classes. Because the buck stops at my desk, I am obligated to make those decisions

that will resolve all the thorny issues.

On one occasion, I did call the local police to assist our security force and this worked. On other occasions, I resorted to firm negotiations with deadlines given. Of course, the students were conscious that I would summon the police if they did not respond accordingly. This worked.

Why did I call the police, given my radical 1960's heritage? Again, I return to mission, and to the convergence of mission and my deepest beliefs about higher education, especially for minority students, who are LaGuardia's constituency. These students-my students-demand and deserve access, over and above all other competing claims--therefore, I decided to honor

LaGuardia's mission by keeping the doors open for them.

As if student strikes (on top of budget crises) are not enough to provide us with a full complement of grey hair, there are any number of "philosophical" conflicts that can be equally unsettling. Take the display of students' art work, for example, which ought to be quite routine in an academic institution where certain freedoms are taken for granted.

At LaGuardia, I was in for a rude awakening when a group of students in consultation with their art instructor decided to display their "masterpieces" in the form of paintings depicting The Beatitudes. The students who placed their work on display thought they had created an interesting subject and wished to share it with the rest of

the world. There were other students, however, who were sorely offended by what they perceived as pornography, or heresy, or both, and proceeded to bring the full weight of their church and the press to bear on this display. The offended students felt that the artists had flagrantly violated their rights by exploiting the abortion issue in the name of art. Some local newspapers were quick to print stories about the displays as well as the demonstrations that resulted from the display.

After reviewing the matter with the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Dean of Institutional Advancement and the faculty member who sponsored the display, I discussed the matter with the student demonstrators. Ultimately, I came down firmly on the side of academic freedom and

allowed the display to continue. Needless to say, this further infuriated the demonstrators, a few church leaders, and a handful of politicians. I took pains to explain the position of the College on the issue and furthermore to impress upon those who felt offended that the College in no way wished to belittle their concerns or to willfully demean their religion. I felt it was my duty as president to adhere to the mission of the College and at the same time be sensitive to the needs of the community. Such a position--as you can well imagine--requires a balancing act that is not always easy to achieve.

LaGuardia's mission is an evolving scenario or script, but its fundamental concepts guide our development. How could we contemplate, for example, an education without

a global perspective? I believe that serious thought must be given to the language and spirit of multiculturalism and economic development. The country as a whole has witnessed dramatic demographic shifts in the last 15 years or so. In particular, urban institutions have experienced these shifts most profoundly. If we fail to meaningfully address such developments, our missions will become largely irrelevant.

A good many of the urban problems that face us day after day fall somewhere within the two major categories of multiculturalism and economic development. The need to develop awareness in the multicultural arena is critical as we seek to address so many of the ethnic, cultural and racial problems that plague our society and ultimately spill over to our campuses. Rather than recede, I think

demographic changes will continue to escalate even more rapidly as we approach the 21st century, thus intensifying the need for us to find solutions.

The trend, in my opinion, will continue far into the next century. Consequently, we must be activists in dealing with issues that could spawn major problems. The demand for further innovation is urgent as we seek to fold an ever-increasing number of different cultures and ethnic groups into the American way of life. As the information age continues to shrink our global village, the need becomes more compelling for an educational response that is decisively multicultural and multi-ethnic.

The interests, influences, and obligations of the United States have expanded globally. Consequently, the world

increasingly looks to us for solutions to seemingly intractable problems. These solutions must ultimately come from our educational institutions. It is not the case that these solutions reside in a few selective institutions such as the constellation of Ivy League universities, Berkeley, MIT, Stanford or the University of Chicago--to name a few. We in the community colleges are engaged in our own meaningful quest for solutions.

In 1985, for example, LaGuardia in collaboration with the New York City Board of Education established an alternative high school for foreign born youngsters who are recent immigrants from non-English speaking countries. Because these youngsters do not have English as their first language, language difficulties would make them high risk students in our traditional high schools.

Employing a very innovative method of language acquisition, our International High School (one of two alternative high schools that we have on campus) has transformed high risk students into highly motivated learners who gravitate quite naturally to higher education. Here is an area that could be fraught with troubles for a president, but one which has enabled us to strengthen our mission to provide access for all students.

As I conclude, let me suggest that I have been spared disastrous outcomes to institutional and urban crises because of the strength of LaGuardia's mission. Fortunately, I have not had to contend with any ethnic or racial flare-ups in all these years in spite of a richly diverse student population in the College--40% Hispanic, 30% Black, 13% Asian-American and the rest White.

This stands in stark contrast to many high profile racial incidents in New York City over the last five years. Pluralism has been the operative concept at LaGuardia. This, I contend, should be a critical ingredient in our educational thrust for the 21st century. I do not anticipate a trouble-free presidency; I know it will not be lacking in crises, adventure, and excitement. I know too that I must be poised at all times to perform those splits that I alluded to in the musical metaphor in the earlier part of my presentation. But that is the nature of the film that we're all characters in, and that continues to unfold for all of us today.

Thank you!

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